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The Trivial Ways of Survival: An Eco Political Study of Perumal Murugan's *Poonachi or the Story of a Black Goat*

Ever since the dawn of civilization, we have been exploiting nature, not coexisting with it. Therefore, the saying rightly goes that we haven't inherited the resources from our ancestors; instead we've borrowed it from our grandchildren.

Had not God Himself, in Genesis 1, verse 26 (King James version), ordained that we, human beings, would have a special place in His creation, and would have 'dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth'? In Western culture our relationship with the natural world has, for a very long time, remained virtually unquestioned because our dominion over that world was anchored in God's word. The exact meaning of dominion in this particular context was indeed debated by theologians – after all, dominion may give rise to all sorts of practices ranging from responsible stewardship to exploitation – but the hierarchy it implies, with us as masters and the natural world in a position of servitude, seemed clear enough. It is only in more recent times that we find a critical awareness of the exploitation to which unchecked dominion may lead. In his 1854 *Walden* we find the American nature writer Henry David Thoreau complaining that 'the landscape is deformed' by 'avarice and selfishness' and that the farmer 'knows nature, but as a robber'.

The scientific revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries involuntarily facilitated a utilitarian, calculating view of the natural world that not much later would become the driving force behind its violation and exploitation by the industrial revolution. It is only in the last fifty years that the seemingly 'natural' hierarchical relationship between human beings and the natural world has begun to be thoroughly studied. Where do we draw the line between nature and ourselves, that is to say, between nature and culture?, Although not all ecocritics would accept that conclusion, it seems hard to get away from the fact that all that can be said and thought of nature belongs to culture.

William Ruekert coined the term Ecocriticism in 1978 essay 'Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism'. According to him, Ecocriticism is the application of ecological concepts in study of literature. Jonathan Bate uses the term 'ecopoetics' for the same.

One of the most common concerns of ecocriticism is the study of relationship between human and non-human thought in the cultural history of human-centered world. David Hazel declares in *The Ecocriticism Reader* that ecocriticism is the analysis of literature

as though nature mattered. It is not just about the cut down trees, dammed rivers. It serves a higher purpose of pondering upon issues like “What counts as environment? What may count? Who marks off the conceptual boundaries? Under what authority? For what reasons?”

Donald Worster in *The Ecocriticism Reader* says that we face global crisis today not because of how ecosystems function, but rather because of how ethical systems function. The crisis can be addressed only by the conscious study human interactions with nature with emphasis on ethical systems. Solution to the environmental crisis involves a return to the past, an awakening from “metropolitan dream”.

Richard Kerridge pays attention to the implications of both literary and popular genres, arguing that recent environmentalist novels, for example, paradoxically “take failure for granted” and generate “narratives of resignation” Ecocriticism turns away from this social constructivism and linguistic determinism of dominant literary theories and emphasises on egocentric values of meticulous observation, collective ethical repository and the claims of world beyond ourselves.

Nature has always been idealised or sexualized in more than one ways. Emerson has shown to us a nature which always wears the colours of the spirit. There has been a mute preference of ‘ego consciousness’ over eco consciousness. Therefore it goes without saying that representation is always already inadequate.

According to Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Sourdieu, human characteristic at present is concerned with intensified concern with materiality in which the places, objects and other commodities become merely props or stays in the background.

In *Poonachi*, Perumal Murugan tells the story of a black goat which was given to the old man by a giant. Though there aren’t any superhuman characteristics associated with the giant it is to be noted that the giant had a prophetic equivalence in the old couple’s life. Poonachi was always undernourished and survived the attacks of eagle and wildcats. In Poonachi, Perumal Murugan has done a marvellous job of creating a narrative that takes a feeble goat through a range of basic human emotions and urges. Perumal Murugan foregrounds **nature** as a major part of subject matter. As we track the destiny of this orphan goat, shaped by a force-field of humans and animals, we realise that the author’s real theme is our own fears and longings, primordial urges and survival tactics. It is reflection of our own responses to hegemony and enslavement, selflessness and appetite, resistance and resignation, living and dying. Through the exploration of life journey of animal, Murugan leads us deep into ‘an intimate history of humanity’ and the incredible human essence that we must fight to preserve.

Poonachi stands as an allegory to human life, its predicaments, existentialism, thrust to be loved, lived and eventually fade away from the world to which you were not more than another small black goat. He places of a goat in this anthropocentric world. He acquires the mouthpiece of a villager to comment thus on the topography which foreshadows the impending disaster:

In that semi-arid stretch of land known as Odakkan Hill, it didn’t rain much that year. The last few years had been no different. If it rained for half an hour on a

rare day, some upstarts called it ‘torrential rain’. They had never seen a rainy season when it rained relentlessly throughout the day, for months on the end. When it rained heavily, they cursed, ‘Why is it pouring like this?’ they were fed up of having to protect the possessions from the rain and getting drenched whenever they stepped out. But even an enemy should be welcomed with courtesy. If we curse and drive away the rain that brings us wealth and prosperity, why will it ever visit us again?(Murugan 1)

The cyclical, complementary and caring nature of the nature is given recognition in the work. A few instances like dew covering up the grass to withstand the heat of sun and nanny goats cross feeding other nanny goat’s litter are mentioned. According to Jonathan Bates, ecocriticism began in “consciousness- raising”. Dana Philip in her essay “ Ecocriticism, Literary Theory and Truth” argues that ecocritics have tended to ignore the recent history of ecology to assume that it’s representation of nature has been more successful than nature as truth. Greg Garrard in *Ecocriticism* (2004) lists various concerns of ecocriticism which includes Pollution, Wilderness, Apocalypse, The Earth, Animals, and Dwelling.

According to Cheryl Glotfelthy , one of the founders of ecocritical movements in America, argues that If we're not part of solution, we're part of the problem. Pollution, the way in which we irresponsibly exploit and damage our own home earth is a touchstone which keeps reminding us of our ‘cultured’ ways and the way to go before we call ourselves ‘cultured’ .According to Cheryl Glotfelthy, human culture is connected to the physical world where human actions at the same time is affecting it and is affected by it. Ecocriticism according to Laurence Coupe “ debates nature in order to defend nature”

As the power structure which rules over our head, politics is closely associated in the exploitation of nature and natural habitat in several ways. The work beautifully stands as an allegory for present Indian state. In *Poonachi*, When a new life was born anywhere in the territory controlled by the government, the authorities had to be informed immediately. All children and domestic animals had to get their ears pierced. After registering the details of name, age and address, the government would organize the ear piercing. The main problem associated with the regime was the set of questions it would provoke. Most of the goats in the state were white. Hence, the colour black provoked instant hostility. A reference can be seen here to religious and cultural minorities who still struggle hard to find their place in the nation which operates in binaries. Actually, not even in binaries, it’s one mono fascist voice which echoes all around the nation. The authorities had the power to turn its own people, at any moment, into adversaries, enemies and traitors. Hence, the old couple decide to club her to another goat’s litter which it just gave birth, claiming she was a part of it too and get the ear pierced. They had to stand in long queue under the hot blazing sun. Everyone was well versed in how they were expected to behave towards the regime. They had mouths only to keep shut, hands only to make obeisance, knees only to bend and kneel, backs only to bend, and bodies only to shrink before the authorities. But they had a difficult time doing all this while trying

to keep their goats under control. The practice in itself suggests to our Aadhar card enrolment. You need it for all of your concerns: to move, exist, so you end up getting 'fingerprint-cuffed' and sell your privacy for someone else's monopoly. You, your voice, your living, your name doesn't matter. Your card matters. Your number matters.

This issue is sarcastically addressed in Poonachi:

Goats have horns, don't they? Suppose they get a little angry and point at the regime? Such goats have to identified, right? That's why they all have to get their ears pierced... There's more to it than simply piercing the ear. When it's looked at under sunlight, a glow will emanate from it. People like us can't see it, but it will be visible to the regime... When goats get together, it spells danger.

(Murugan 36)

It's not long ago that the entire nation was made to stand in queues for their survival- the process of demonetization. This practice sarcastically portrayed in the work.

We don't have the habit of standing in long queues. That's why they are training us.

We have to get used to queues.

We must make queuing a habit.

It's important to train ourselves for queues.

We need queues for everything.

We must get used to stand in queues.

We must get used to waiting in queues.

Queues will make us patient.

Queues will make us tolerant.

Must get used to queues.

Must make queues a habit (Murugan 38)

Reference is also given to a man who fainted on the queue and died.

Rich v/s poor structure of every society is given voice:

“When did the rich ever suffer any hardship? Its only poor people who come here like fools to stand in the queue and suffer.”

“Speak softly sir. The regime has ears on all sides”

“There’s an old saying that regime is deaf”

“It’s deaf only when we speak about our problems. When we talk about the regime, its ears are quite sharp” (Murugan 39)

The way government keeps an eye on us offline and online has been a matter of news these days. The governmental tactics to play it deceitfully and silently focusing on less important matters to create controversies thus hushing up the real matter is sarcastically portrayed here when Poonachi gives birth to seven kids, which is unusual:

Seven kids huh? This is a miracle even for the government. Higher authorities must be informed.

Do you think there is some cheating involved in this miracle? At any rate we will know the truth only after conducting a high level investigation. (Murugan 45)

Value of a non-human is dependent on the usefulness to humans. We’re unknowingly in a mission to turn the whole earth to a sum total of hyper objects which are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans. In the preface to the work Perumal Murugan says thus:

I am fearful writing about humans, even more fearful of writing about Gods. I can write about demons, perhaps. I am even used to a bit of the demonic life. I could make it an appointment here. Yes, let me write about **animals**. There are only five species of animals that I’m familiar with. Of them, dogs and cats are meant for poetry. It is forbidden to write about cows or pigs. That leaves only goats and sheep. Goats are problem free, harmless, and above all energetic. A story needs narrative pace. Therefore I’ve chosen to write about goats.

Author begins the story in the model of fables and folk tales. After all it’s a goat life. The unwelcomed, unacknowledged birth of Poonachi is described thus, “Once, in a village, there was a goat. No one knew where she was born. The birth of an ordinary life doesn’t leave a trace, does it? ” (Murugan 1)

There's this dilemma if a thoroughly domesticated animal that depends on the owner for his daily bread still qualify as 'nature'? Can we, to take a quantum leap, in the early twenty-first century still speak of nature, in the sense of something truly itself, truly autonomous, wholly authentic, completely outside our sphere of influence? Or are even the places where we human beings have not yet left our mark – if there are any such places left – now ever so subtly affected by a process of global warming caused by our carbon dioxide emissions.

When wild animals are representative of masculine freedom, domestic animals are feminine servants of humans. Similarities or interconnectedness lies in the way women and nature are treated in the patriarchal society. The term ecofeminism is coined by French Feminist Francoise d Eauborne in 1974. Ecofeministic undertones can be read in the work where in an instance, while grazing, Poonachi comes across a flock of sheep. She held a strong dislike for the lambs because they held their head down. She wondered: "Can you call it a living when you live without looking at anything but the ground? If it was in your nature to bow down, why would anyone shackle you? And yet, they were fortunate, these sheep. They had no inkling that to bow was to be shackled." To be marginalized and doubly marginalized are matters of grave concern. But what's even more pathetic is when the convicted doesn't even know its own value or rights. All thanks to the behavioural interpellation ideologies a woman receives from birth.

Even the basic needs of an animal like food and mating are compromised and is allowed, controlled or dejected according to human needs and expectations. Episode where the fellow goat, Koduvayan is castrated leaves an etching pain in the mind of readers. The boatman who preceded the act curses himself, calls himself wretch and admits that he has done a "sin bigger than the sin of homicide". The episode where author describes Poonachi's love Poovan, their unfulfilled love and desire refreshes our mind and makes us think maybe, just maybe animal love is deeper and pure than the conditional human love. Her sexual pangs and cries for Poovan were answered by an old ram whom she disliked. After an year when they finally made love' what awaited Poovan was the untimely slaughter as the festival had ended. Poonachi's kids were sold to be old woman's wealth in gold.

Wilderness refers to the sacral space, place of refuge and landscape of ultimate authenticity. A classical example is Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* shows a preoccupation with wilderness. Romanticism was a movement which survived on escapist fantasies. Pastoral conditions we talk about are tamed and idealised, where nature is chosen over wild. This accounts to why Terry Gifford rightly argues that romantic poetry is more accurately termed as 'post-war pastoral' or 'anti-social pastoral'. In *Poonachi*, Poonachi gets lost in the forest and loses herself in the extremely harmonic microcosmic world she would like to sometime inhabit in. She sees:

The moon appeared in the sky, directly overhead, and illuminated the watery expanse of the pond. The forest seemed to come alive suddenly. A few birds rose in the moonlight and flew away. A short while later, a large pack of animals came roaring into the pond. They entered the pond, shattering silence, drinking the

water and swimming around it. Stuck to the rock Poonachi watched the spectacle. Her heart was hopelessly eager to jump into the pond, to swim in it and enjoy herself. She knew, however that she was destined to remain an onlooker.

(Murugan 81)

Dwelling represents a long term association of humans with the landscape. The idea of the intrinsic “harmony” or “balance” of nature undisturbed by humans, as invoked by Meeker, for example, has been largely abandoned by ecologists (Botkin 1992), but remains a moral touchstone for environmentalists and eco-critics, leading Greg Garrard to distinguish between the “pastoral ecology” of popular myth and the “postmodern ecology” of the science itself (2004: 56–8). Dana Phillips’s extended consideration of this problem in *The Truth of Ecology* (2003: 45) argues: “Ecology sparks debates about environmental issues, it doesn’t settle them.” It is not yet clear how these critiques will be assimilated within the field.

Barry Commoner in *The Closing Circle* quotes thus, “Any living thing that hopes to live on Earth must fit into ecosphere or perish”. According to Bible, apocalypse is the final destruction of world. At the end an ecosystem is imaged which is damaged beyond repair. Apocalyptic rhetoric seems a necessary component of the environmental discourse. Laurence Buell in *Environmental Imagination*, says “apocalypse is the single most powerful metaphor that contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal.”

In the closing chapters the horrific famine is pictured. Poonachi was pregnant again for the third time:

After squirting the last drop of milk from Poonachi’s udder, the old woman stopped milking her, saying that she was likely to yield blood from now on.

There was no blood either, in Poonachi’s body. The kids in her belly were sucking that up as well... There were rumours that people were killing and eating cats and dogs.

Poonachi couldn’t move her own body at all. Nothing seemed to be moving inside her belly, either... the old woman ran to her urgently and touched her.

What lay there was not Poonachi, but a stone idol. (Murugan 170)

Nature must be a co-inhabitant and not an aid or subordinate. The worldly wise Old woman puts it directly as: “People keep destroying everything and shoving every last bit into their mouths. How then can anything or anyone survive here apart from human beings? In the end, can even people survive for long?” (Murugan 64)

Starting life as a foundling and going through the ordeal of being a miracle, Poonachi experiences both the promise and the structural violence embedded in the life of a female. She turns into a stone idol at the moment of her death, harking back to a hoary tradition in the folk culture of Tamil Nadu whereby the memory of an innocent girl destroyed by the random and ever present violence of the world, is worshipped as a deity. Poonachi acquires adequation at end, a literary equivalence that respects the thing and let's it stand forth.

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